

Dealing With Death

Story by
Heike Hasenauer



(Above) A trowel, here laying beside replica bones used for training, is one of the most important tools in the recovery of remains.

(Right) Soldiers training to become mortuary-affairs specialists unearth a replica skeleton during an exercise at Fort Lee, Va.



Jim Bohon

AS people around the world continue to focus on the war against terrorism, so, too, do they realize that more U.S. soldiers fighting in Afghanistan and other trouble spots around the world will undoubtedly die on foreign soil.

A soldier doesn't take the oath of enlistment without knowing that death is an occupational hazard. But, as is true for mainstream society, death can come much more unexpectedly in peacetime.

In Afghanistan, and across the Army, specially trained soldiers, most of them in the Army Reserve, must deal with death when tragedy strikes.

During Soldiers' visit, CPT Corey Boyer commanded the 54th Quartermaster Company, the Army's only active-duty mortuary-affairs company, stationed at Fort Lee, Va.

A day after the Sept. 11 terrorist attack on the Pentagon, he and other soldiers from his company performed the painstaking and heartbreaking mission of recovering and preparing remains.

Initially, five 7-person teams were on-site.

"A gruesome part of the work involved removing the rubble and searching through it for remains," said LTG Thomas J. Plewes, commander of the Army Reserve.

A Reserve mortuary-affairs unit, the 311th QM Co. from Puerto Rico, had arrived on the scene two days later to augment the 54th.

Because the Pentagon disaster site was an active crime scene, FBI officials first conducted their own investigations of the criminal nature of the deaths, said SGM Alfred Grigler, the senior enlisted mortuary-affairs

specialist in the Army. Only then were the litter teams allowed to enter portions of the collapsed west wing of the Pentagon.

"This has been a first-time experience for me," Boyer said of performing the job he was trained to do in a real-life, mass-casualty situation. He had only recently joined the unit as its commander in May 2001.

He previously taught and wrote doctrine at Fort Lee's Mortuary Affairs Center, where all mortuary-affairs specialists are trained.

"Training helps us prepare for what we do. But you can never be fully prepared for something like what happened at the Pentagon. I still get choked up," Boyer said. "I felt very badly for the families. It just made my heart ache."

At the same time, he said, "the experience prompted me to refocus on the importance of human life and family. I also know how important our job is. Recovering remains and returning them to families provides some comfort to those families. We're giving them closure."

The need for soldiers trained to recover, process and send home the bodies of the dead has always been critical in combat. Soldiers from the 54th QM Co. have traveled around the world to recover and return the bodies of soldiers killed while conducting missions in hostile lands. And it isn't just soldiers they recover.

Grigler deployed with the unit in response to the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon; the attack on the USS *Stark*; and the killing of 18 special forces soldiers in Somalia. He also participated in the recovery of remains following the crash in Croatia of an



Training for mortuary-affairs specialists also includes preparation of remains for shipment to their final resting place.

Air Force plane carrying Commerce Secretary Ron Brown and others.

Members of the 54th QM Co. were also in Oklahoma City following the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. Sixteen soldiers from the 54th worked 12-hour shifts for two weeks following that blast, placing remains in body bags and moving them to a temporary identification tent. Then they worked with officials from the Oklahoma City Medical Examiner's Office to identify them.

"Our primary mission is to recover remains with dignity and respect," Grigler said.

In mortuary-affairs specialist training, students study map reading; search and recovery operations;

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During a training exercise, SPC Jacob Vigil notes the exact position of a replica skeleton before beginning to excavate it.

gridding (to establish grid coordinates and azimuth readings marking the location of every set of remains or parts of remains found); interment and disinterment; and mortuary operations.

They also learn about the human skeletal system in order to distinguish human remains from those of animals. And there are fingerprinting and dental identification classes. Mortuary-affairs personnel do tentative identifications only, but completion of dental charts is part of the job of processing remains.

In the first and fifth weeks of the training, students visit the state medical examiner's office in Richmond, Va., where they get a hands-on perspective, Grigler said.

"They examine remains, assist in performing autopsies and take tissue samples," he added. "They see remains before the remains arrive at a funeral home, and have been prepared and placed in a casket."

Following the first visit, they undergo a psychiatric evaluation to ensure they're OK, Grigler said.

Most of the students have never been exposed to death, he said. It's important to the Army that prospective

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mortuary-affairs specialists know what they will be doing upon graduating from the six-week course.

One instructor at the school said: "A lot of soldiers who enter this field think they'll be dealing with funeral details — flags, somber music, salutes. They won't."

While they usually don't perform autopsies, Grigler said, mortuary-affairs specialists may assist in conducting them if they're assigned to Army mortuary facilities overseas, as at the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany. Soldiers from LRMCC have also rotated in and out of Bosnia and Kosovo since 1995, where their assistance has been required.

Sometimes the preparation of remains for viewing and burial requires mortuary-affairs specialists to clean bodies from head to toe, shave dead soldiers or suture remains after an autopsy.

Mortuary-affairs specialists see some horrific stuff, said Grigler, who was a mortician before joining the Army. "We work on remains and focus on just that. It's only afterward that the realization of what we've seen and dealt with hits us."

Counseling before, during and after missions helps mortuary-affairs specialists cope with the aftermath of



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Classes in human anatomy and the structure of the human skeleton are vital aspects of the mortuary-affairs training.

dealing with the death of others.

Soldiers in this MOS stay in the MOS because "they understand that they work for the families — people they'll never see and who will never know them. But by bringing closure for the family, they help them in dealing with their loss," Boyer said. □



Paul Sweeney

PV2 Jessica Lee Haberstroh examines a mannequin's teeth and notes her observations on the "victim's" medical record.